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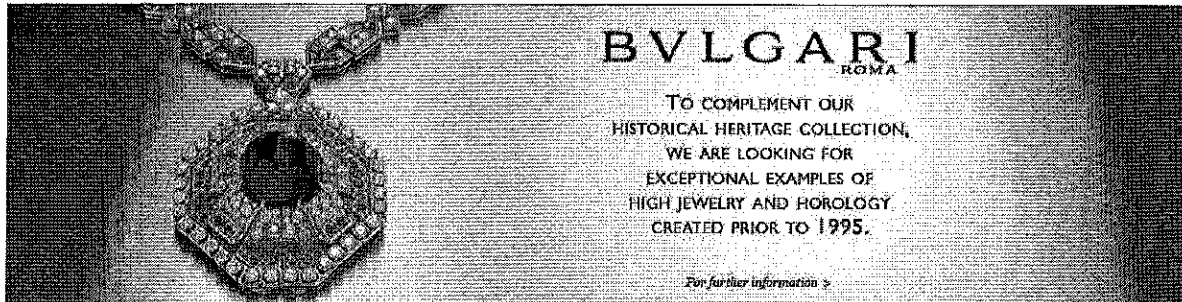
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## Owner of upscale eatery and celeb hotspot goes AWOL

By Carlos Greer

July 27, 2015 | 5:01 am

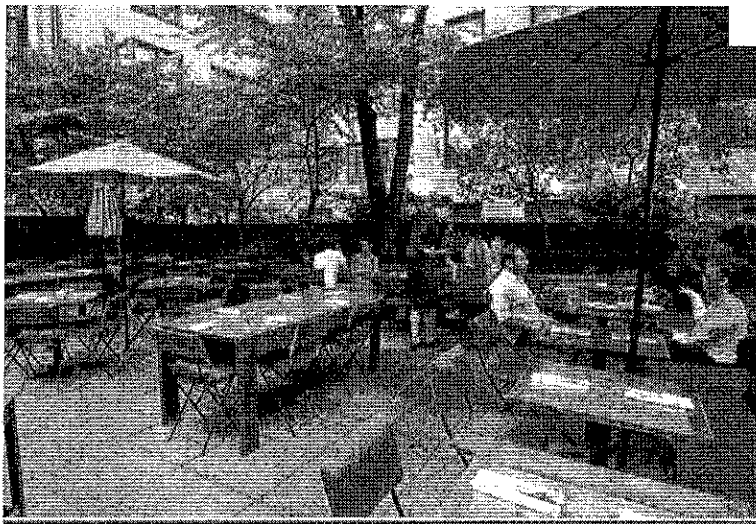


Photo: Christian Johnston

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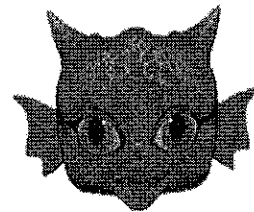
Restaurant Avra opening outpost in old Rouge Tomato space

Pure Food and Wine — the upscale raw vegan restaurant where Woody Harrelson has a house account and Alec Baldwin met future wife Hilaria — has shuttered for a second time after owner Sarma Melngailis mysteriously went AWOL, and staffers say they got a raw deal.

"We have not been paid for the pay period ending June 28, and before that we had several checks that would bounce," bartender Kevin Woods told us. Daniel Schubmehl, who worked at the Irving Place eatery for eight years, added, "I know for certain that a substantial amount of money is also owed to a variety of vendors. The wine vendors alone are owed thousands of dollars."

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The staff's been protesting outside on Thursdays and even had a vegan potluck on the street there last week.

Employees walked out in July after Melngailis went unreachable for two months. "No one can get in contact with her. We've left e-mails, called her cellphone and nothing has been returned," Woods said.

ADVERTISING

Bizarrely, the restaurant, which opened in 2004 and has been a fave of celebs like Katie Holmes, found itself in a similar situation in January, when Melngailis disappeared. "She didn't have the funds, and we filed a class action suit. She attracted new investors and reopened . . . and somehow was able to maintain full ownership," said Schubmehl. Melngailis told health blog Well+Good the place had financial turmoil from the start: "What a lot of people, and even the staff, don't know is that the restaurant has a very complicated history, and from day one has had an enormous amount of debt."

Her popular One Lucky Duck stand in Chelsea has also suffered an unlucky fate.

The staff hopes to reopen the restaurant without her involvement and plans to file a class action case against Melngailis for back wages, we're told. Additionally, Melngailis has been hit with another suit by one of her investors. "All of the investment money is gone," a staffer said.

Sources tell us Melngailis is holed up in New England. She did not respond to us.

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